

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Sandra Hagen



Burrowing owls and (inset) pellet.

CASTING PELLETS

It's fourth-grade science class. A two-inch, gray-brown hairy object rests on your desk. The teacher is encouraging you to dig in, break it apart. A few students gingerly poke it with toothpicks or tweezers. The more daring ones use bare hands. Carefully, you separate the object and recognize what appear to be vertebrae, femurs, ribs and, the coolest of all, a skull. Then, like fitting a puzzle together, you glue the pieces on construction paper, and implore mom to hang it on the fridge at home.

What you've likely dissected is an owl pellet, containing the indigestible parts of the bird's food. Although a pellet looks like it came from the opposite end of the bird, it's actually regurgitated through the mouth. An owl pellet may consist of fur, feathers, bones, bird bills, claws, teeth and skulls. They're expelled from birds of prey, such as great-horned owls, about 12 hours after prey is eaten. Burrowing owl pellets may contain the hard exoskeleton of insects, like a grasshopper leg or beetle head.

Owls are not the only pellet casters. Hawks and eagles also cough up indigestible remains. The scouring action on the throat and the prevention of food build-up in the stomach by casting pellets appears necessary for birds of prey and many other species. Some captive birds have died due to diets entirely of raw, boneless, hairless, or featherless meat.

Numbers of birds that eat insects, fish or even plants will regurgitate the indigestible. Waterbirds such as great blue herons and cormorants, shorebirds such as killdeer and snipe, and various insect-eating land birds from loggerhead shrikes to barn swallows will cast pellets. Some waste no time with the chore, either, casting a pellet just 30 minutes after feeding.

The duck-like grebe species is known to eat its own feathers to provide material to help form pellets. Black-billed cuckoos, a summer resident of North Dakota's wooded hills and stream valleys, seemingly take it even further when gorging on caterpillars. Cuckoo stomachs become so heavily lined with caterpillar hairs, eventually the entire stomach lining is shed and regurgitated as a pellet.

As interesting as that may sound, it's not something you'd likely want to hang on the fridge at home, however.

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